

Sunday, July 16, 2023 am

CLOSER TO GOD (47)
Disciples of Christ (4)
Running the Race

Today we resume our study of our 2022-23 theme, “Closer to God”. The past 3 lessons have been devoted to being disciples of Christ. We have addressed what a disciple is and noted some passages that describe being a disciple. The simple definition of a disciple is a learner, but as we have noted he is much more than simply a student. He seeks to learn from and imitate his “master teacher”. In the gospels, we have noted several passages of scripture that identify the true disciple of Christ. 1) Luke 9:23-24 – He must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Jesus; 2) Luke 14:26-33 – he counts the cost seriously and is willing to put Christ Jesus before any other relationship; 3) John 8:31-32 – He will abide in His words; 4) John 13:34-35 – He will show genuine love for his brethren; and 5) John 15:8 – He will bear much fruit.

In our lesson today, we want to dig a little deeper by noting some descriptions of the Christian life that help us understand “discipleship”. Throughout the New Testament, writers would make frequent comparisons to familiar areas of life. Referencing commonly understood jobs and actions, application would be made as to how a disciple of Jesus is to conduct himself. For example, disciples were compared to and displayed qualities of : 1) An athlete, 2) A soldier; 3) Pottery; 4) A branch; 5) A child; 6) A body part; 7) A sibling; 8) Servant; 9) A pilgrim; 10) Salt and light; 11) An apologist; and 12) A fisherman.

Our next few lessons will notice some of these and how they help us develop our “discipleship”. Let’s get started with our relationship with ourselves.

I. A Disciple is like an athlete.

- a. Athletics were an integral part of Roman and Greek culture during the first century. There were games in various cities that drew massive attention. The Isthmian games were held bi-annually near Corinth. The Olympic games were held every 4 years in Olympia, Greece. There were also other major games. To compete athletes were required to dedicate at least 1 year of their life to training. To win came with great honors.
- b. COMMITMENT - The disciple of Jesus displays many qualities associated with athletics. Consider the following passages:
 - i. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
 1. He enters the race with the intention of winning -
 - a. There are “athletes” who engage in sports simply for the exercise, there is no intention to “win” anything. They just like whatever the sport or exercise is. And that is good from a bodily standpoint – 1 Timothy 4:8 tells us this, but it also notes that “bodily exercise profits a little.”
 - b. It is the athlete that gets SERIOUS about it that prepares to competitively run to win.
 - c. The disciple of Jesus enters this “race” seriously. He knows what is at stake and enters with the intention of crossing the finish line. Recall Luke 14:28ff which noted that we need to count the cost of being a disciple.
 2. He is temperate in all things –
 - a. The serious athlete is going to do EVERYTHING he can to gain the greatest advantage. He trains long and hard, he takes care of himself bodily by not engaging in activities or eating foods that do him harm and hinder him from being as efficient as he can possibly be. He denies himself of pleasures because he knows that races are won by fractions of a second.

- b. In calling us to “discipleship”, Jesus emphasized that He must be first. Luke 14:33 noted, “So likewise, whoever does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.”
 - c. The true disciple of Jesus will exercise temperance or self-control in his life. Self-control and self-discipline are fundamental to our growth as Christians. We have noted on numerous occasions that if there is a difference, self-control addresses our willingness to do without what we want while self-discipline is often about doing what we need to do, even when we do not want to. Self-control (or lack thereof) is a factor in every sin we commit. Christians are to exercise self-control – 2 Peter 1:6, Galatians 5:22-23 -a fruit of the Spirit; Titus 2:11-12 – God’s grace teaches us to “deny ungodliness and worldly lusts” and to live “soberly, righteously and godly in this present age...” 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, we are called upon to abstain from ungodly behaviors and we need to possess our own vessels in sanctification and honor...
- 3. He competes with certainty – VS. 26, Paul gives 2 illustrations.
 - a. NOT running with uncertainty – a key component to winning a sporting contest (especially at the highest level) is KNOWING what the goal is. Yes, there is the physical aspect of the event (the training, properly using your body and equipment, etc.), but there is also the MENTAL aspect – you have to know what your goal is and HOW you are going to get there.
 - b. The Christian race is to be run without doubting about our ultimate goal – to get to heaven when this life is over. He knows the rules (more in a moment), he knows his strengths and weaknesses, he knows “the course”, he knows the goal, etc. 2 Timothy 1:12 – notes Paul’s certainty, 4:7-8 – Paul KNOWS the “crown of righteousness awaits”. 1 John 5:13 – John wrote so that they might KNOW they have eternal life; 2 Corinthians 5:1 – we know... we have a building from God...eternal in the heavens. There is a reason disciples live as they do – it is NOT for nothing!
 - c. Fighting, but NOT just wildly swinging. This is not talking about “shadow boxing” as one prepares, but contextually it would be one who is wildly swinging hoping to hit something. That is wasted energy. In this race for eternity, we need to be acting “with purpose”. We need to KNOW what we are doing and how. Romans 12:2 describes us as being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Philippians 3:12-14 – I press toward the goal for the prize...
- 4. He disciplines his body – puts it to the test – to strengthen himself.
 - a. The wording for “discipline” (NKJV) is a word that means to punish, specifically to give a black eye. Obviously, Paul is NOT saying he physically pummeled himself, but the point is that he would take measures, sometimes strong, to ensure that he would NOT fall into temptations.
 - b. Sometimes, we need to “test ourselves” – 2 Corinthians 13:5 to make sure that we are not overcome by the smallest of temptations and trials.
 - c. NOTE: How Paul here declares that he HAS to do this, lest he become disqualified. Paul is clear here that even he could forfeit his salvation. Note 2 Timothy 2:5 – you are not crowned unless you compete according to the rules. In our modern contests (as was true back then), there are very specific rules to be followed. Violating any rule comes with

consequence, and often disqualification. God's word is our "rulebook" that we MUST follow completely if we are to finish the race.

- ii. Hebrews 12:1-2 – in this text we again find several elements associated with our "race".
 1. First, we learn that we are not alone. The writer has just concluded a "list" of faithful endurance (every example in Hebrews 11 endured with faith). We are running this race together. In describing what it means to be a disciple, be reminded that Jesus said in John 13:34-35 – our love for one another is a manifestation of our "discipleship".
 2. We set aside ANYTHING that hinders us as we run this race.
 - a. This is related to our previous text (temperance). Often, when an athlete trains, they will add weight or resistance for the purpose of strengthening themselves for the contest. Recall vs. 27 above – Paul "disciplined" his body. BUT, when it comes time to race, that materials are set aside to give you optimal ability. That is also true spiritually.
 - b. The text says he is *laying aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares*. Clearly, sin will hinder us in our race, but this text includes not only the sinful but ANYTHING that hinders us.
 - c. There are many things that may not be wrong within themselves, but they get in the way of fully developing our discipleship. Things that consume our time, resources and energy. 1 Corinthians 6:12 notes that all things are lawful, but not necessarily expedient, and "*I will not be brought under the power of any.*" Consider also the "rich, young ruler" whom Jesus told to sell everything – Matthew 19:21ff. The money was not sinful itself, but it was a hindrance to Him (cf. 1 Timothy 6:9-10).
 - d. We must run with "endurance" – we keep going and cannot give up. Hebrews 10:36ff.
- iii. 1 Timothy 4:7-8 – he exercises himself toward godliness.
 1. Another passage that addresses preparation reminds us of the direction of our lives. Paul instructed Timothy that while "bodily exercise" is profitable, make it your main goal to "exercise yourself toward godliness."
 2. The word for "exercise" is a Greek word from which our English "gymnasium" is derived. We are reminded here that this is something we are working toward. Colossians 3:2 reminds us to "set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth." We need to be "other worldly". If you will, our spiritual race ought to be an "obsession".
 3. Godliness is the word pointing toward reverence, awe and respect toward God and being devoted to Him.
 4. We need to "get into God's gymnasium" (i.e. His word) – Hebrews 5:14 – senses exercised to discern both good and evil.
- iv. 1 Timothy 6:12 – In another passage, Paul challenges Timothy to "fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life." The word "fight" means to engage in a contest, and to struggle". Our English word "agonize" is derived from the Greek word. Wrestling and boxing were common athletic events in the games back then as they are now. We do not "wrestle with flesh and blood" - Ephesians 6:12.
- v. 2 Timothy 4:8 – Finally, we must finish the race.
 1. In several of our texts we have seen this borne out. 1 Corinthians 9:24 notes that we run to win. Hebrews 12:1-2 we run, "looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

2. Paul in 2 Timothy 4:8 noted that he had finished the race and could confidently anticipate the crown of righteousness – a victor’s crown.
3. For many of the Greek games, the crown was a wreath of some sort. Obviously, it was perishable, but what it stood for is what made it meaningful. 1 Corinthians 9:25 reminds us that we compete for “an imperishable crown.” We are in this “contest” to receive a home in heaven when this life is over.

Being a disciple means that we are the race of our lives – our eternal lives. We have seen in this lesson that it is serious quest. It is not to be taken lightly, but with firm commitment both to stay faithful and follow God’s rules. That is what being a disciple is about. What about you? Have you entered the race? Are you still running it with the endurance God expects? Are you “on course”? Think about these things, and if there is something we can do to help get you to where you need to be, we are here.